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ABSTRACT

A search of women's magazines yields countless missives on the virtues of female vigilance not only in protecting personal health but also in protecting spouse and family health. Indeed, the face and content of women's magazines has changed remarkably little from their 18th- and 19th-century predecessors, which circumscribed the ideology of femininity and family to the domestic arena of home and family. Kathryn Shevelov explains that the women's magazine creates a community "of and around the text," reflecting its readers and constructing much of their social reality. Consequently, female readers experience their gender through the mirror of the women's magazine regardless of the extent to which that mirror reflects or distorts reality. Today's magazines counsel women to educate themselves about men's health. One analysis of language and gender in women's and men's magazines suggests that the language of these articles actually functions to create an anxiety that can only be mollified through purchase of the magazine and/or the products it advertises. In a postmodern society, however, the women's magazine remains, for much of its readership, one of the few sites of ongoing engagement with culture through writing. Writing assignments based on ideological analyses of print culture can serve to awaken the critical skills of a wide range of students while concurrently developing the analytical abilities essential in a competent writer and citizen. (NKA)

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How to Save Your Husband's Life: Health Reporting and the Rhetoric of Responsibility in the Late Nineties Women's Magazine

As most of you have probably realized, the paragraph in front of you is entirely fabricated, a pastiche of actual sentences culled from several women's magazines with the word wife exchanged for the word husband. Fabricated to make a point. Men's magazines do not print these kinds of articles. Rather, a search of an index of men's magazines using the key word's wife and health yields such finds as the "One Hundred Best Wives of All Time," and "The Twelve Virtues of the Perfect Wife," as well as articles on staying fit and sex habits. In contrast, a comparable search of women's magazines yields countless missives on the virtues of female vigilance not only in protecting one's own health but also in protecting one's spouse and family.

I began this research out of frustration. Simply put, I was tired of being a nag. I was tired of suggesting to my husband that we might consider switching shampoos because our brand contained a known carcinogenic, or that he should take zinc for his cough or vitamin B-12 for his migraines. Tired of explaining that our six-month-old couldn't have honey because it was potentially toxic for infants or that our third-world manufactured mini-blinds might contain dangerous levels of lead dust. Tired of watching his eyes glaze over as I brought him in on the

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most recent health risks threatening our family. I began to wonder: why, as a woman coming of age after the sexual revolution, near the end of the twentieth century, did I shoulder the burden of this information while he bit into his Big Mac blissfully unaware of the fat content, the nitrites, or worse, e-coli concealed within. Okay, maybe not the fat content. Everybody knows about that.

It didn't take long to find the answer staring back at me from the grocery newsrack, in the magazines I occasionally tossed into my cart in a moment of weakness, like a pack of sugary bubble gum or a candy bar. *Women's Day*, *Family Circle*. What do I have to say for myself? Every month they promise to solve all my problems--and all for a buck twenty five.

It's a bargain that comes at a psychic price. Even in the late ninteen nineties, the content of these magazines places heavy demands on their constituents. Though, if we are to believe the statistics, the majority of their readers work outside their homes, and if married, seek a gender parity in their relationships quite unlike those of the generations that proceeded them, many women's periodicals do not reflect these changes. Nowhere is this discrepancy more evident than in the health reporting of these magazines, the rhetoric of which declares in no uncertain terms that responsibility for the welfare of the family, including not only children, but also husbands, rests squarely with the female half of the heterosexual domestic partnership. While the new woman has taken on a myriad of new roles and responsibilities, as these magazines describe them, she has relinquished few, if any, of her old ones.

Indeed, the face and content of women's magazines has changed remarkably little from their early eighteenth and nineteenth century predecessors, who felt it their chief duty to circumscribe the ideology of femininity and family, an ideology based on the ultimately Victorian ideal that women, according to Kathryn Shevelov of *Women and Print Culture*, were

different "in kind rather than degree from men," (3) and consequently possessed a "separate but equal" sphere of influence: the domestic arena of home and family (3).

Addison and Steele's eighteenth century *The Spectator*, for example, the precursor to the women's magazine with its large female following, offered, as Shevelov notes, a "paternalistic model" in which the mother, "the center of the family, creates an image of order around her, devoted to and sanctioned by, her adoring husband" (139). Later, the rise of women's periodicals in the nineteenth century continued to extend the role of the periodical in the engineering and "management of gender differences" (19). Today, modern women's magazine's uphold this legacy by training women how to be "women" as society defines them (192). A principal site of ideology formation, like many periodicals, the women's magazine creates a community, as Shevelov explains, "of and around the text" reflecting its readers and *constructing* much of its reader's social reality (195).

Consequently, female readers experience their gender through the mirror of the women's magazine regardless of the extent to which that mirror reflects or distorts reality. Shevelov observes, for example, that while traditionally male-oriented magazines tend to focus on past times or interests separate from gender roles, women's magazines chiefly "address their readers as women" (196). Apparently, men do not need overt instruction in being men the way women do, although they may need to learn how to ferret out that special woman who possesses the ideal qualities of a wife (196).

Thus, Shevelov points out that though the contemporary women's magazine contends that it offers its readership a full "range of options . . . whether securing a husband, raising children, making herself beautiful or dressing for success in the corporate hierarchy, the reader of the magazine is being instructed, as a woman, in a definition of womanhood " (196-97). Such a

definition, however, may in fact have more in common with Addison and Steele's vision than with contemporary reality. A recent article in *Family Circle* entitled "Nineteen Ways to Save Your Husband's Life," for example, further perpetuates gender difference by defining health as a domestic matter, stereotyping men as careless and irresponsible about their health and characterizing women as guardians of not only their own and their children's but also their husband's emotional and physical well-being. In justifying this stereotype, the article explains that men are "25% less likely to visit a doctor than [women]" which amounts to "113 million fewer visits per year" (Brott 58). Not surprisingly, the article reports that "men are 90% more likely to die of heart disease, 20% more likely to die of stroke and 40% more likely to die of cancer" (Brott 58). Yet, the article maintains, the future needn't seem so grim as "50% of all premature deaths are preventable" (Brott 58). Unfortunately, it continues, directly addressing the sympathies of the female audience, "a lot of men don't seem very interested in modifying their behavior . . . so it may be up to you" (Brott 58).

At this point the article does acknowledge that some readers may be wondering why, if they assume responsibility for their own health needs, can't their husbands do the same? Herethe article expalins that health is a women's arena, a place in which compared to their male counterparts, they are "seasoned veterans." Reproductive biology necessitates the initiation of women into the health care system in their teens and forces them to be more open about discussing even intimate health matters. Men, it seems then, have a cultural and biological excuse for their negligence.

Nonetheless, the article underscores that while men may be excused for this shortcoming, it is women who must pay the price by outliving their spouses and perhaps even having to watch their "fathers, brothers and sons" die prematurely (Brott 60). All hope is not lost, however.

There are things women can and by extension, the article implies, should do to "improve the quality and length of the lives of the men [they] love" (60). These include: 1.) Leaving health related newspaper and magazine clippings on his pillow. Be sure to clip only articles that focus on the very latest research on men's health. Any good clipping service must stay up to date; 2.) Enlist a "male friend of your husband's to offer encouragement and advice" (obviously, if you've resorted to leaving articles on your husband's pillow, your own advice lacks credibility) 3.) Get creative, or in other words, be sneaky and deceptive. One woman's husband denied his weight problem to such an extent that she had to slip a "low fat cookbook into a traditional cookbook jacket," so that he would eat the meals she cooked for him (Brott 58). Desperate times call for desperate measures.

Finally, the article pleads, women must educate themselves about men's health. Often preoccupied with other matters and/or in denial, many men, women are told, never learn they have a deadly disease until it is too late because they *and their wives* don't know what signs to look for. "If you love your guy then," Michael Scult, president of a medical communications company urges, "make sure he get's checked" (60). Another woman laments, "my husband would be alive today if he had gone to the doctor when I first told him to" (62).

In another *Family Circle* article, "How I Saved My Husband's Life: One Woman's Battle to Help Heal Her Husband's Heart," the female burden of men's health strikes even closer to home. When Kathy Butler heard the news that her husband's unhealthy lifestyle had led to a potentially fatal 90% artery blockage, she claimed to feel "helpless and close to hopeless" (Fischman 47). The article emphasizes that though she "cared" she couldn't break through to her husband and convince him to improve his health habits (47). Consequently she admits to a life shadowed by a "continual sense of fear. What if Dwayne [her husband] got worse? What if she

had to life the rest of her life alone?"(47).

Given these incentives, it is not surprising that after her husband agreed to give Dr. Dean Ornish's radical heart disease reversal program a try, it is his wife who is depicted as "determined to make the program work" (49). During the program, Dwayne says that though he is surrounded by a team of experts to help him with his heart problem--psychologists, nutritionists, and of course, cardiologists--it is the support he gets from his wife that gives him "the motivation he needs to make healthy, permanent changes in his life style habits" (50). His renewed emphasis on his wife's role is interesting here considering that she has been urging Dwayne to change his habits all along. Do these experts finally give her nagging some credibility? Furthermore, Dwayne admits that while he used to eat to relieve tension, now Kathy "sets aside an hour most evenings for both of them to do stretches, yoga and meditation" (50). Forget the personal trainer Oprah, what you really needed was a wife.

Another benefit of their commitment to this program, the article emphasizes, is that "Dwayne and Kathy have become much closer" (50). Where once she feared losing her husband, Kathy's determination to help "save his life" has actually improved their relationship, brought him back to her, so to speak. Ultimately, Dwayne tells us that now he's looking forward to living to be one hundred--and "all thanks to his wife," gushing, "if it weren't for Kathy, I might not be alive today" (50). A touching and heartfelt sentiment to be sure, but one which Dr. Ornish and his hard-working cadre of experts might take issue with.

Again, we see that though a husband might recognize the benefits of a health regime, it is his wife who is expected to manage the program, and insure, under penalty of widowhood, that her spouse stays on track. It is fitting then, that articles such as these are accompanied by ads for an array of health products designed to help women secure their husband's and families'

survival. For example, an adjacent dietary supplement ad claims that a senior Olympic competitor for the vault gives most of the credit for his ability to beat his rivals to his "trainer and nutrition expert" his wife, who encourages him to drink *Ensure*, a product that promises to provide all the nutrients "you and the ones you love need to help stay healthy, active and energetic" (62).

Consequently, though the modern women's periodical may have superficially changed with the times, it remains economically dependent on the construction of a feminine ideal which remains in force today (Shevelov 197). Perpetuated by a relentless rhetoric of responsibility that saddles women with one burden after another while relieving them of few, this ideal victimizes the very audience it cultivates, a phenomenon not entirely unfamiliar to women's print media. In light of this over-emphasis on women's responsibilities, underscored by Kathy Butler's testimony that while her husband abused his health she lived in constant fear, it is perhaps less surprising that women suffer from a disproportionate incidence of anxiety disorders and depression. Christanne Miller's analysis of language and gender in women's and men's magazines, in fact, suggests that the language of these articles actually functions to *create* an anxiety that can only be mollified through purchase of the magazine and/or the products it advertises (7).

In a postmodern, post print society, however, the women's magazine remains, for much of its readership, one of the few sites of ongoing engagement with culture through writing. As such, just as it did in its infancy two centuries ago, the women's periodical holds a powerful potential for liberation. Beyond the call for large scale societal reform implied in this essay, one way to harness this potential and challenge the pervasive ideals promoted by print media may lie in the classroom. Writing assignments based on ideological analyses of print culture can serve to

awaken the critical skills of a wide range of students while concurrently developing the analytical abilities essential in a competent writer and citizen, for as Shevelov reminds us while this century draws to a close, "the tools of liberation are not in themselves liberating. Print culture can provide the bricks and mortar for constructing a prison--or the dynamite for shattering its walls" (198).

Stephanie Vanderslice
Rhetoric of Bodies and Gender Politics
Article Excerpt

HOW TO SAVE YOUR WIFE'S LIFE

Want to save your wife's life? The answer is simple. Learn about women's health. Many women simply never realize they have a fatal disease until it's too late because their husband's don't know what to look for. But it doesn't have to be that way. Here's what you can do beginning right now to improve the quality--and the length--of the lives of the women you love. And remember: it's never too early to get your daughters on track!

**Anyone interested in discussing writing assignments that teach students to analyze print and other media, feel free to contact me at stephv@mail.uca.edu or care of the University Writing Program, University of Central Arkansas, Irby 105-201 Donaghey Ave. Conway, AR 72035.

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